Putting theory into practice

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Putting Theory into Practice
Applying MI in the classroom meant enhancing, rather than replacing, techniques we value

by Terri Coustan and Lezlie Rocka

In 1997, we were teaching adult basic education. Terri taught low-level learners, mostly Hmong from Laos, who had little or no schooling in their own language and limited use of English. Lezlie taught adult basic education to low-level learners, women, most of them single mothers with dependent children receiving public assistance. We became participants in a teacher research project that focused on applying multiple intelligences (MI) theory to our adult education practices.

Multiple intelligences theory is just that, a theory. It is a psychological theory that addresses what the brain does with information. After learning about MI, we were both excited to try it in our classrooms. It made so much sense. It validated what we witnessed with our students everyday: people seem to have different strengths, or intelligences, and they seem to process information and express what they know in different ways.

We wanted to use the theory, but we found ourselves asking just what that meant. How does one apply a theory? MI theory has no specific application method, instructional approach, or curriculum, yet teachers in many K-12 schools are applying it today. What this means to us is that they are using the theory to guide how they teach. We decided to begin by using MI theory as a way to think about our students as we did the day-to-day, on-going, on-your-feet assessment we always do. Then, we let the theory influence instructional choices. We will talk about these processes separately, although often they happened simultaneously.

Viewing Students

At first, our application of MI theory involved only how we, as teachers, viewed our students. When we were "wearing MI glasses," we could view students' choices and preferences. We could see ways in which students learned most easily, enjoyably, and efficiently and assumed that they corresponded with students' strongest intelligences. Equipped with this information, we tried to develop or encourage students to participate in activities that would aid their learning by drawing upon their strengths.

For example, decorating at Christmas last year was not necessarily an MI-based activity. But when Terri wore her MI glasses, the activity provided her with information about her students. She offered the learners, mostly Hmong, the opportunity to decorate the class door. She brought in a variety of materials and framed the top of the door with jagged paper resembling mountains. After a discussion about Christmas in Laos, the students went to work.

Blia cut out a tree using a paper folding and cutting technique that differed from the technique used by everyone else in the class. He made another tree with a star on top. Choukha cut out a bird within the body of the tree and then he cut out a dinosaur.

Mai See and Seng, two women, traced and pasted trees directly on the door. Choua chose not to make a tree but made an airplane with a slit in the side in which he inserted a wing. Other students did not use the paper or the scissors but told Terri about Christmas in Laos, where it never snows.

Without MI glasses, Terri would have seen that her students cut, pasted, drew, traced trees and airplanes, and that some people talked. She would have made a mental note that some students were "good" or "gifted," as demonstrated by their art work. She might have focused on how their individual efforts blended into a spectacular seasonal display with interesting shapes, colors, and textures. The

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decorated door would have held her attention. She was looking at the forest and not the trees.

With her MI lenses on, she was able to see beyond the end product, to how individual students uniquely communicated their knowledge and their strengths. For example, the students demonstrated differing spatial strengths. Blia's tree, complete with star on top, demonstrated his unique two-dimensional spatial intelligence; Choua's airplane was an example of three-dimensional spatial intelligence. Some experimented with familiar animals and objects, others chose more unfamiliar animals such as dinosaurs, demonstrating both with their spatial and linguistic strengths. Mai See and Seng demonstrated differing linguistic and intrapersonal strengths in talking about their memories of Laos.

These observations helped Terri to assess the strengths of the students. She noted her observations in her teacher's log and thought about them later. She was not only able to learn more about the ways that her students used and expressed information, but she also used the information in planning activities more mindful of their strengths. In the past, she would have assessed her students using more traditional ways, through reading and writing activities. She learned that she can assess students by paying attention to all the things they do in the classroom, even decorating a door for Christmas.

Understanding Strengths

All the intelligences are operating at all times in people. When we perform an action, such as playing the piano, for example, we don't use only one intelligence. We usually have our whole array of intelligences involved in everything we do. Individual strengths and weaknesses differ, but we use all our intelligences to make sense of the world.

Intelligences by themselves cannot be observed, but can be inferred by analyzing individual strengths. In our classrooms, we were able to view areas in which we thought our students had strengths, but it was not possible for us - or necessary - to define anyone's intelligence profile. Instead of guiding students' towards what we saw as activities that suited their intelligences, we decided it was best to supply, within lessons, an array of choices and opportunities through which students could express their different intelligence strengths. We thought that this would allow students to explore receiving and communicating information in ways that suited them best.

We saw students' strengths and preferences reflected through the activities they selected, the length of time they devoted to the activities, their body language during the activities, and what they said about the activities both during and after doing them. These strengths and preferences emerged as we observed students choosing the same activities or types of activities over and over.

Terri had this example in her classroom observation journal: The students really liked looking through the magazines for the new vocabulary. Yang Lee found four pictures for the word "problem." She said the word "problem" each time she found a picture. I could see her mind working as she scanned the picture bringing new and old information together. Over the year, whenever Terri offered choices of activities to illustrate understanding of new vocabulary, Yang Lee regularly chose to look for pictures in National Geographic magazine. She noticed details and questioned the background of pictures. In viewing a photo of a girl in a village, she alone commented on the mountains and their shape and compared them to those in Laos. For Yang Lee, pictures provided informational input as well as an opportunity to communicate her knowledge. Her keen interest in pictures seemed to reveal her strengths in spatial intelligence, which she used to reinforce or expand vocabulary and gain information from pictures. Yang Lee also seemed to link her spatial intelligence to her linguistic and intrapersonal strengths by labeling or questioning the spatial forms and describing them to Terri and to the class. Spatial intelligences seemed to be the force driving Yang Lee's comprehension and expression.

Influencing Instruction

Our MI-related instructional goal was to allow students to succeed by providing them with opportunities to work from their strengths. Each day we offered them choices. They were able to select how they wished to learn and how they wished to demonstrate that they mastered information. The choices we offered reflected the different intelligences identified by Howard Gardner.

Some students chose to read about a topic, some chose to look for pictures, or to hear a story on tape. Some chose to write, others chose to draw, or to construct. On other occasions we used whole-group instruction, asking our classes to draw, act out a play, or pantomime a word.

Lezlie's Experience

A reading lesson Lezlie modified after learning about MI is a good example of the choices we offered. The class read Meet Addy by Connie Porter, a book classified as historical fiction. It illustrates some of the experiences slaves had on the Underground Railroad. Addy, the main character, is a young teen born into slavery who escapes with her mother to freedom.

Before she learned about MI theory, Lezlie began the group reading lesson with a pre-reading question based on what the class had already or were about to read.

She asked the students whether they thought that Addy and her Mama would make it to freedom. They discussed and wrote about this.

Then, while the students read aloud, Lezlie encouraged them to apply all the skills they already learned, reminding them to use their finger, a pencil, or a book mark to help guide their eyes. She made sure to allow them ample time to use decoding strategies before giving a prompt, and coached students on beginning or ending sounds of words. They discussed what they read after every paragraph, reviewed the meaning of difficult words, and reread the paragraph if necessary. After reading, she led a post-reading activity in which she asked students what they liked or did not like about what had been read. Students wrote about this. Some shared their writing with the class.

When Lezlie looked at this lesson from an MI perspective, she did not change it, she added to it. The projects and activities she added allowed students to choose how they wanted to express what they understood about the reading. She presented the students with options. They did these activities after doing the reading for the day. After they finished, she had them share what they worked on with the class.

Lezlie explains: My assumption in offering choices was that students would choose projects which corresponded with their strongest intelligences. Those who felt most comfortable role playing the stories possibly had greater bodily/kinesthetic and interpersonal skills; those who chose drawing possibly had stronger visual/spatial skills. I am not positive which expressions correlated with which intelligences, yet this knowledge did not seem necessary. Once we began doing the projects along with the reading, students' interest in the story increased. They came into class excited to read and were lively and animated while working on their projects. They worked together organizing themselves and their projects until they were finished. Their new-found ability to perform a task well in school seemed to elevate their egos, as did their newly-gained understanding of the reading material.

Post-Reading Choices

To add an MI perspective to a reading lesson using the book Meet Addy, Lezlie added these post-reading activities. Students could do them alone, with a partner, or in a group.

- Draw a picture or show in Play-Doh any part of what we read.
- Pick a song or a chant that would give you inspiration if you were doing something very scary. Write the words to the song or sing it.
- Make your own map of Addy and journey either on paper or with Play-Doh
- Write or discuss with someone a part of what we just read that you think is interesting.
- Act out a part of what we just read
- List the places Addy and Mama hid on their escape to freedom.
- Design your own project for this chapter.

Value

Lezlie felt that instruction based on applying MI theory did seem to facilitate learning for her students. For example, reading comprehension did not seem to happen as easily when students only read and wrote. There seemed to be a synergy between expression and comprehension. Students seemed to gain greater understanding of a story after they expressed what they read in a way that was comfortable for them. Renee, for example, remembered little of what she read until she started to role-play the story after she finished reading. This alternative form of expression seemed to make meaning of the text and embed it in her memory. The more Lezlie encouraged students to express and explore meaning in their own ways, the more she was surprised and moved by the depth of their responses.

Instruction based on MI theory also seemed to cause improvements in specific reading strategies for students. This was not a planned goal but an unexpected and powerful result. It seemed that when students were given the freedom to choose how they wanted to express what they understood, they became invested in the final result of their efforts and wanted their information to be presented as accurately and as well as possible.

While students were doing their projects, Lezlie saw them combing through the reading to get information and details. They wanted to be sure their projects were accurate. She had not seen this desire for accuracy and details when they had to write a book report; then they just wanted to get the report done. Reading became a tool to do the projects, whereas a book report makes the reading the focus.

Terri also found compelling reasons to use MI theory-based instruction with low-level ESOL learners who experienced failure in traditional classrooms. Reading and speaking are very limited channels of expression for these learners. MI-based instruction offers a greater range of activities through which they can learn. For example, since Ka and Pia's English is so limited, they are not able to communicate much through writing and speaking. Ka prefers to draw. Although her drawings do not have much detail, they are important because they allow her an additional pathway via which she can communicate. Since she was unable to say many words in English, by drawing she was able to demonstrate to Terri her knowledge of a word or an idea. Terri was then able to respond verbally and help her with the words that were slow in coming. Her drawings became a bridge to learning English and a way for Terri to check on her level of understanding.

Once her low-level learners became more familiar with having choices, Terri observed changes in their choices. Students started with easier activities or those chosen by a friend. After four weeks, they were trying new activities and working efficiently on the ones that they have previously tried. They were no longer doing just the easier activities, such as writing their new spelling words in glitter. They were doing the harder activities, such as sequential story strips, and they were taking more control of their learning. They were seeking out their own ways to learn and developing confidence in their choices. Terri believes that these new skills will make it easier for them to learn English and will transfer to problem solving outside the classroom.

In Conclusion

Teachers are bombarded with new curricula and instructional approaches. Each new approach seems to suggest that we replace the old with something new. Applying MI theory was different: it did not mean that we abandon activities that are important to us and to our students. It meant that we enhance them, and think about our students differently.

None of this came easy to us. We found that after each class, we needed to reflect on what had happened and what to do next. However, from the beginning, we saw validity in the theory, and after applying it we saw that it helped our students learn. How did MI theory affect us and our students? Our students broadened the ways in which they expressed themselves and benefitted from this learning process. They liked being able to express themselves in ways other than speaking and writing. When given the opportunity to choose, they tapped into their own strengths, finding a picture to illustrate a vocabulary word, or building objects with clay.

We as teachers discovered fuller and richer ways to assess our students, and we used the information in planning our lessons. We are still reading about the theory and talking to other teachers who are using it. As we continue to teach, we know that our application of MI theory will take us in new directions. We wish you good luck on your own MI journey.

About the Author

Terri Coustan has a master's degree in elementary education and elementary administration. She holds certification in ESOL and has taught a family literacy class at the International Institute in Rhode Island for the past eight years.

Lezlie Rocka has a bachelor's degree in anthropology and holds a certificate in elementary education. She taught low-level basic adult education at Dorcas Place Parent Literacy Center in Providence for three years and now teaches ESOL at the Adult Collaborative of Cape Cod for Educational and Support Services.

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